

Centralized Control



It is crucial that one commander have the authority and responsibility for planning, coordinating, and executing joint air operations. According to Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, centralized control is “the

planning, direction, prioritization, synchronization, integration, and deconfliction of air and space capabilities to achieve the objectives of the joint force commander” (p. 34). The concept of centralized control—an airman centrally controlling all theater air and space forces—is often referred to as the *master tenet* and must be adhered to if the joint force commander is to receive those forces’ maximum combat capability.

As with all the tenets of air and space power (*decentralized execution, flexibility and versatility, synergistic effects, persistence, concentration, priority, and balance*), centralized control requires an airman to have the necessary insights and understanding, keep things in their proper perspective, and provide appropriate direction to the integrated joint air and space forces. Successful commanders will remember that all wars are unique and provide important lessons, but the next war will always be different. The airman in charge of the current war must always draw on history, analyze his (or her) and others’ recent experiences, and then adjust and apply doctrine to achieve the greatest results with the joint forces with which he (or she) has been entrusted.

Working hand in hand with decentralized execution, an airman must implement centralized control of air and space forces, maintaining a strategic perspective of the big picture to prioritize and balance the limited resources at his or her disposal. That airman, the *joint force air and space component commander* (JFACC), is the single focal point for employing a joint commander’s air and

space forces and is best positioned to ensure that each demand is heard and that the competing demands are appropriately prioritized. That requires the JFACC to develop and maintain a handle on theaterwide operations.

The doctrine of centralized control has been violated at various times in history with predictable results. The competition for air assets in North Africa at the beginning of World War II and again during most of the war in Southeast Asia was intense, causing airpower capabilities to be fragmented and placed under the control of various lower-level commanders. Without having a single airman in charge, scarce resources were not properly prioritized and were, therefore, often misallocated, causing delays in achieving operational objectives. The lessons learned in North Africa became part of the Army Air Corps’s doctrine, documented in the War Department Field Manual 100-20, *Command and Employment of Air Power*, dated July 21, 1943:

The inherent flexibility of air power, is its greatest asset. This flexibility makes it possible to employ the whole weight of the available air power against selected areas in turn; such concentrated use of the air striking force is a battle winning factor of the first importance. Control of available air power must be centralized and command must be exercised through the air force commander if this inherent flexibility and ability to deliver a decisive blow are to be fully exploited. Therefore, the command of air and ground forces in a theater of operations will be vested in the superior commander charged with the actual conduct of operations in the theater, who will exercise command of air forces through the air force commander and command of ground forces through the ground force commander.

This War Department manual well explained the need to have an airman in control of theaterwide airpower (and now space-power) resources—the beginning of the centralized-control concept. The lessons learned during Vietnam only serve to reinforce that earlier doctrine as the most effective way to employ air and space forces.

To Learn More . . .

Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1. *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, November 17, 2003. <https://www.dctrine.af.mil/Library/Doctrine/afdd1.pdf>.

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Polowitz, Maj William G. “Role of the JFACC in Future Conflicts.” Alexandria, VA: GlobalSecurity.org, 1993. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1993/PWG.htm>.